

Consumer responses to peers' luxuriously looking Instagram accounts: the moderating role of materialism

Abstract

Findings of two experimental studies show that exposure to peers' Instagram accounts portraying a luxurious lifestyle may negatively affect one's state self-esteem, due to negative social comparison. Exposure to peers' luxurious lifestyle leads to the notion that the signaler is better off, decreasing one's state self-esteem. Moreover, these negative effects on an individual's state self-esteem are stronger for highly materialistic individuals. Though, luxuriously looking Instagram accounts of peers may also cause inferences of the signaler being a braggart. However, the results show that this bragging only leads to negative effects on state self-esteem for highly materialistic individuals and not for less materialistic individuals. These results can explain why highly materialistic people experience a higher self-esteem threat after exposure to luxurious Instagram profiles. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: luxury consumption, self-esteem, social comparison theory, upward social comparison, materialism, social media

Track: consumer psychology

1. Introduction

Previous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of luxury purchases on an individual's self-esteem (e.g. Hudders & Pandelaere, 2011), whereas not being able to afford certain luxury products may lower self-esteem (Meert, Lens & Pandelaere, 2012). These studies suggest that luxury may positively affect an individual's self-esteem by signaling value to significant reference groups hereby increasing one's social standing with respect to these reference groups. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and more specifically upward social comparison might suggest that these luxury purchases by peers could impose a self-threat among those who are not consuming the same level of luxurious products, decreasing their self-esteem (Tesser, Millar & Moore, 1988). With the advent and current ubiquity of social network sites (SNS), the likelihood of exposure to peers' luxury has only increased in recent years. Moreover, as these sites allow for careful management of impressions as users may over-emphasize their achievements, they may insinuate that other people are living better lives (Chou & Edge, 2012). This feeling like others are better off has been referred to as negative social comparison (NSC; De Vries & Kühne, 2015) and may undermine self-esteem among people who are exposed to the luxurious lifestyle of peers (Festinger, 1954). Hence, in this paper, we investigate the influence of exposure to a peer's Instagram account portraying a luxurious lifestyle on state self-esteem (SES), using 2 experimental studies. Moreover, participants' level of materialism is included as a moderator as we expect that highly materialistic individuals' SES might suffer more from exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle as they attach greater value to luxury (Hudders et al., 2011). Contrary, we expect that less materialistic consumers may perceive flaunting luxurious possessions as bragging, which may in turn reduce SES threats.

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

Following social comparison theory, people have an intrinsic drive to compare themselves with others and how they think they are doing compared to others is crucial in determining their self-perceptions, i.e., how they judge themselves. Thus, perceiving the self as doing worse, might be detrimental (Festinger, 1954). As people in general present the best version of themselves by selectively presenting and highlighting the positive aspects of their lives, social comparisons that occur in a SNS environment are very likely to be negative (Chou et al., 2012). Moreover in SNS people will mostly be connected with or follow others who are psychologically close, which amplifies the effects of social comparison (Tesser, 1988). Furthermore, in some life domains, social comparisons seem to be more important than in others. Income appears to be such a domain, which implies that people are concerned about their relative position within their reference group and consequently have a stronger preference to be better off than others (Bogaerts & Pandelaere, 2013). As luxuries can be regarded as an expression of wealth and are thus ideal to express one's social status, conspicuously consuming them is a manner to deal with these positional concerns and improve their position (Veblen 1899). On the other hand, when exposed to a peer's luxuries, disadvantageous social comparison might be induced. Consequently, inferences that the peer is better off (i.e. NSC) might have a detrimental effect on other's SES. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle on Instagram leads to lower SES compared to exposure to an ordinary lifestyle. This effect is mediated by NSC.

Indeed, income is a positional domain, meaning that individuals care about their relative standing and are keen to be better off than others. However, some people put more emphasis on status and are consequently more concerned about their relative social position compared to others (Solnick & Hemenway, 1998). Moreover, there are individual differences in the extent to which people value and accord status to wealth, potentially expressed by luxuries (e.g. Richins and Dawson, 1992). When people consider the comparison domain as relevant and important, the influence of social comparison is magnified. Thus, when people compare themselves with a superior target in such a domain, SES will be more negatively affected (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991). In case of wealth and luxury, we might expect that this domain is especially relevant to materialistic individuals. Materialists place possessions and their acquisition at the center of their lives and tend to judge their own and others' success by the number and quality of possessions accumulated and view them as essential to their satisfaction, self-definition and well-being (Richins et al., 1992). Furthermore, materialistic individuals seem to attach greater value to luxury and consequently consume more of it compared to less materialistic people. Also, the consumption of luxury tends to benefit materialistic individuals more compared to less materialistic consumers in terms of satisfaction with life (Hudders et al., 2011). Accordingly, one can expect that materialists are more inclined to believe that peers exhibiting their luxurious lifestyle are doing better than they are (Richins et al., 1992). As a consequence, their SES may be more likely to be negatively affected after exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle:

H2: Compared to less materialistic individuals, materialists are more likely to exhibit the proposed indirect negative effect of exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle on SES, through NSC.

The hypothesized threat that peers' luxurious pictures poses to self-esteem, may be attenuated when people interpret the pictures as less detrimental to self-perceptions (de Vries et al., 2015). Rather than interpreting them as a proof that they are better off (i.e. NSC), observers may also perceive flaunting with luxuries on Instagram as bragging which can lead to negative impressions of the signaler (Berman, Levine, Barasch & Small, 2014). As a result, we suggest that these inferences of bragging may nullify the assumed negative effect of exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle on state SES. However, this might only be true for people low in materialism. Materialists tend to attach more importance to the impressions they make on others than do less materialistic people (Christopher & Schlenker, 2004). To make a good impression, they are prone to use their possessions as they believe they symbolize personal success and social standing (Richins et al., 1992). As materialists are thus not averse of showing off possessions to symbolize personal achievements themselves, they will most likely tolerate that others aim to craft positive self-presentations by showing off their luxuries. Consequently, their SES will still be negatively affected after exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle as they justify bragging as an expression of success:

H3: Exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle may cause inferences of the peer being a braggart. Among individuals high in materialism, these inferences will in its turn negatively affect state SES. For individuals low in materialism, however, these inferences of bragging will not affect SES.

3. Study 1: The impact of Exposure to Luxury on State Self-Esteem

3.1 Method

Study 1 (N = 161, 40.3% men; M_{age} = 39.13, SD_{age} = 12.82) comprised a single-factor between subjects experimental design in which participants were asked to view a peer's Instagram account, exposing luxurious vs. non-luxurious travel pictures. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. In a written scenario, participants were asked

to imagine they recently switched jobs and needed to work closely with someone who has the same job function as them and started a few months earlier. After getting to know him/her a little better, they decided to take a look at his/her Instagram profile on which they came across some pics of his/her latest holiday. This scenario was developed with the intention to make participants believe that they were dealing with a peer. For the purpose, fictitious Instagram accounts were created and pretested, including six pictures representing a luxury or non-luxury holiday. To avoid any confounds related to gender identification, male participants were exposed to the Instagram account of a male colleague and vice versa, that had a similar Instagram bio (“Stephan(ie) Jones | My life in a nutshell”) and equal numbers of posts, followers and following. These figures were kept constant over both conditions. Afterward, participants completed a questionnaire. First, as a manipulation check, participants’ perceptions of the luxuriousness of their colleague’s latest holiday were measured using 5-point semantic differential scales that probed perceptions of luxuriousness, expensiveness, conspicuousness and status. Next participants’ level of NSC was measured with two items adapted from de Vries et al. (2015). Participants had to indicate to what extent they agreed (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree) with the following two statements: “... has a better life than I do” and “... is doing better than I am” ($\alpha = .86$). Finally, to assess temporary changes in self-esteem, participants’ SES was measured by Heatherton & Polivy’s 20-item scale (1991, $\alpha = .93$).

3.2 Results

First, manipulation checks revealed that participants in the luxury condition perceived their colleague’s travel pictures as more luxurious ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 4.76$, $SD = .62$; $M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 4.01$, $SD = .92$, $t(159) = -5.99$, $p < .001$), expensive ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 4.76$, $SD = .54$; $M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 4.06$, $SD = 1.02$, $t(159) = -5.40$, $p < .001$), having higher status ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 4.63$, $SD = .79$; $M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 4.01$, $SD = .91$, $t(159) = -4.63$, $p < .001$) and more conspicuous ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 3.99$, $SD = 1.16$; $M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 3.46$, $SD = 1.08$, $t(159) = -2.96$, $p = .004$) than participants in the non-luxury condition.

To test the first hypothesis, we conducted a simple mediation analysis using Hayes’ PROCESS macro (2013, model 4, 5000 bootstrap resamples) with luxury condition as independent variable, NSC as mediator and SES as dependent variable. Results show a significant indirect effect of luxury on SES through NSC ($ab = -.19$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI: $[-.33; -.09]$). Being exposed to a luxurious Instagram profile leads to more NSC ($a = .64$, $SE = .13$, $p < .001$) and NSC in its turn has a negative effect on SES ($b = -.30$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$). There was no significant netto direct effect of luxury on SES ($c' = .01$, $SE = .13$, $p = .93$). These results confirm H1.

4. Study 2: Self-Protecting Effect of Perceiving the Signaler as a Braggart Among Low Materialistic People

4.1 Method

Study 2 ($N = 160$, 36% men, $M_{\text{age}} = 30.60$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.48$) employed a 2 (Luxury Condition: Luxury vs. Non-Luxury) by 2 (Materialism Level) between subjects experimental design. After reading a written scenario, similar as in study 1, participants were exposed to a screenshot of their colleague’s Instagram profile, this time depicting six pretested pictures of the luxury or non-luxury house to which he/she recently moved (pictures of house interior and exterior), followed by a questionnaire. First, a manipulation check was carried out using the same items as in study 1. Next, NSC was measured in the same way as in study 1 (de Vries et al., 2015, $\alpha = .84$). Then participants’ perceptions about the signaler being a braggart were questioned with the following 3 items, adapted from Ferraro, Kirmani and Matherly (2011)

and measured on a 5-point Likert scale: "... is trying to impress others", "... is trying to show off", "... is trying to gain approval of others" ($\alpha = .89$). Next, participants' SES was measured using Heatherton & Polivy's 20-item scale (1991; $\alpha = .92$), similar as in study 1. Finally, participants' level of materialism was measured using the 6-item version of Richins et al.'s (1992) Materialistic Value Scale (Richins, 2004; $\alpha = .88$) and included as an interval variable in the analyses. Similar as in study I, the gender of the respondent was matched to the gender of the colleague's Instagram account they were exposed too. The Instagram bio, number of posts, followers and following were the same as in study I and kept constant over both conditions.

4.2 Results

First, manipulation checks revealed that participants in the luxury condition perceived their colleague's pictures as more luxurious ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 4.76$, $SD = .51$; $M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 3.78$, $SD = 1.08$, $t(158) = -7.29$, $p < .001$), expensive ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 4.72$, $SD = .68$; $M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 3.81$, $SD = .98$, $t(158) = -6.81$, $p < .001$), having higher status ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 4.67$, $SD = .73$; $M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 3.83$, $SD = .97$, $t(158) = -6.20$, $p < .001$) and more conspicuous ($M_{\text{luxury}} = 3.94$, $SD = 1.17$; $M_{\text{non-luxury}} = 3.31$, $SD = .90$, $t(158) = -3.81$, $p < .001$) than participants in the non-luxury condition.

Confirming the results of study 1, a simple mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013, model 4, 5000 bootstrap resamples) with luxury condition as independent variable, NSC as mediator and SES as dependent variable showed a significant indirect effect of luxury on SES through NSC ($ab = -.11$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI: $[-.22; -.07]$). Being exposed to a luxurious Instagram profile leads to more NSC ($a = .35$, $SE = .14$, $p = .01$) and NSC in its turn has a negative effect on perceived SES ($b = -.31$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$). There was no significant netto direct effect of luxury on SES ($c' = .19$, $SE = .11$, $p = .09$).

To test hypothesis 2, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013; model 7, 5000 bootstrap resamples) with luxury condition as independent variable, materialism as moderator, NSC as mediator, and SES as dependent variable. The analysis revealed that the moderated mediation index was significant ($ab = -.13$, $SE = .06$, 95% CI: $[-.26; -.03]$). Next, we further examined the conditional indirect effects of luxury on SES for different levels of materialism (Hayes 2013). When materialism was moderate (M) or high (+1SD), there was a significant indirect negative effect of luxury on SES through NSC ($ab = -.12$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI: $[-.21; -.04]$ and $ab = -.24$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI: $[-.40; -.12]$). On the contrary, when materialism was low (-1SD), this indirect effect was eliminated ($ab = .00$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI: $[-.13; .14]$). Our data suggest that exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle may cause NSC, which, in turn, negatively affects SES. However, this process is conditional on individuals' level of materialism: highly materialistic individuals are more likely to exhibit this effect, confirming H2.

To test hypothesis 3, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013, model 14, 5000 bootstrap resamples) with luxury condition as independent variable, materialism as moderator, bragging as mediator, and SES as dependent variable. The analysis revealed that the moderated mediation index was significant ($ab = -.07$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI: $[-.17; -.00]$). Looking at the conditional indirect effect of luxury on SES at different values of materialism, we only found a significant negative indirect effect of luxury on SES through bragging when materialism was moderate (M) ($ab = -.06$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI: $[-.16; -.00]$) or high (+1SD) ($ab = -.13$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI: $[-.29; -.02]$). When materialism was low (-1SD) this indirect effect was eliminated ($ab = .01$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI: $[-.07; .07]$). These results point out that peer's luxurious pictures might as well cause inferences that the peer is bragging. While due to these inferences, less materialistic individuals' SES is not (negatively) affected after exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle, highly materialistic individuals' SES is still

negatively affected after exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle despite the fact that they are aware that the pictures could have been posted to Instagram with the deliberate intention to brag. Thus, our findings confirm H3.

5. General Discussion

The current studies investigated the effects of exposure to peers' Instagram posts portraying a luxurious lifestyle on the SES of those involved. Across two studies, we show that this is the case, as exposure to peers' Instagram posts portraying a luxurious lifestyle may cause NSC, which consequently negatively affects the SES of those involved. Given today's importance of peer recommendations and their amplification through social media, this result is particularly interesting in the light of emerging marketing techniques that make use of the principles of social comparison, such as influencer marketing. As people will perceive these highly followed and admired, yet "everyday" consumers as slightly better than oneself, those upward standards could serve as role models, which may benefit the brands and products they (indirectly) promote as people will be willing to achieve the same status. However, brands should be careful in picking their influencers or the most suitable standards, as comparisons with superior others might be detrimental for one's Self, as illustrated. Future research could investigate whether these negative outcomes caused by comparison with superior others would also reflect on the brands and products he/she promotes.

Furthermore, we found support for the rationale that the influence of social comparison is magnified when people put a lot of emphasis on the comparison domain, in this case luxury and wealth (Major et al., 1991). Because materialists place a high level of importance on acquiring more possessions and are thus particularly interesting to target, our finding that materialists are more likely to engage in NSC due to exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle which consequently negatively affects their SES, is important to keep in mind when setting up a marketing strategy that seeks social comparison.

Importantly, the current research finds that exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle, portrayed on Instagram, may also result in perceptions of the signaler being a braggart. Due to these inferences of bragging, people who score low on materialism are less likely to experience negative indirect effects of exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle on their SES. As previous research has suggested different defense mechanisms that people may use to reduce the negative effect of comparisons with superior others, such as ascribing them unfavorable traits and characterize them as unlikeable (Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearn, 2008), future research could further investigate whether depicting a superior model as a braggart could also serve as a kind of self-protective strategy. However, for highly materialistic individuals, it was found that despite perceptions of bragging caused by exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle, a negative indirect effect on SES does arise. Future research should further investigate why exposure to a peer's luxurious lifestyle still negatively affects materialists' SES, despite the fact that they may also view the peer as a braggart. Moreover, the impact of suspicion of bragging in terms of advertising effectiveness could be investigated.

References

- Berman, J. Z., Levine, E. E., Barasch, A. & Small, D. (2015). The Braggart's Dilemma: On the Social Rewards and Penalties of Advertising Prosocial Behavior, *Journal of Marketing Research*, 25, 90 - 104.

- Bogaerts, T. & Pandelaere, M. (2013). Less is more: why some domains are more positional than others. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 39, 225-236.
- Chou H. T. & Edge, N. (2012). They are happier and having better lives than I am": the impact of using Facebook on perceptions of others' lives. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2), 117-21.
- de Vries, D. A. & Kühne, R. (2015). Facebook and self-perception: Individual susceptibility to negative social comparison on Facebook. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 86, 217–221.
- Ferraro, R., Kirmani, A. & Matherly, T. (2011). Are They Who They Claim? Intentionality and Authenticity in Identity Signaling With Brands. In R. Ahluwalia, T.L. Chartrand & R.K. Ratner (Eds.), *NA- Advances in Consumer Research*, 39 (pp. 80). Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research.
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human relations*, 7(2), 117-140.
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Heatherton, T. F. & Polivy, J. (1991). Development and validation of a scale for measuring state selfesteem. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 895-910.
- Hudders, L., & Pandelaere, M. (2011). The silver lining of materialism: The impact of luxury consumption on subjective well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 13, 411-437.
- Major, B., Testa, M., & Bylsma, W. H. (1991). Responses to upward and downward social comparisons: The impact of esteem-relevance and perceived control. In J. Suls & T. A. Wills (Eds.), *Social comparison: Contemporary theory and research* (pp. 237–260). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Meert, K., Lens, I. & Pandelaere, M. (2012). Exposure to unattainable luxury: effects on extrinsic and materialistic goals. In Z. Gürhan-Canli, C. Otnes & R. Zhu (Eds.), *NA- Advances in Consumer Research*, 40 (pp. 182-186). Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research.
- Parks-Stamm, E. J., Heilman, M. E., & Hearn, K. A. (2008). Motivated to penalize: Women's strategic rejection of successful women. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34, 237-247.
- Richins, M. L. (1995). Social Comparison, Advertising, and Consumer Discontent. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 38(4), 593-607.
- Richins, M. (2004). The Material Values Scale: Measurement Properties and Development of a Short Form. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(1) 209-219.
- Richins, M. & Dawson, S. (1992). A Consumer Values Orientation for Materialism and Its Measurement: Scale Development and Validation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19, 303-316.
- Christopher, A.N. & Schlenker, B.R. (2003). Materialism and affect: the role of self-presentational concerns. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 260–272.
- Solnick, S. J. & Hemenway, D. (1998). Is more always better?: A survey on positional concerns. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 37(3), 373–383.
- Tesser, A. (1988). Toward a self-evaluation maintenance model of social behavior. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21 (pp.181-277). New York: Academic Press.
- Tesser, A., Millar, M., & Moore, J. (1988). Some affective consequences of social comparison and reflection process: The pain and pleasure of being close. *Journal of Personality and Social Comparison*, 54(1), 49 – 61.
- Veblen, Thorstein (1899), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New-York: McMillan.